

Internet-Based Corporate Environmental Reporting by Companies

Ralf Isenmann, Christian Lenz
Universitat Kaiserslautern, Germany

Goal and Scope . Corporate environmental reporting is gaining a more central role, either for companies' economic success or towards sustainable development. Many companies try to improve their reporting practice because it is an expedient tool to identify and reduce environmental impacts and to achieve competitive advantages. Until now, reporting by companies and corporate environmental reports (CERs) as main reporting vehicles are dominated by paper-based publications and traditional publishing on print media but the use of conventional CERs and print media is limited. Hence, companies expect help by using the Internet. Within the emerging field of reporting, Internet use and CERs available on the Internet have become one of the most fashionable topics of the late 1990's. However, in contrast to its intuitive appeal, Internet use still lacks conceptual clarity. In response to urgent need for companies' guidance, a detailed and comprehensive system exploiting technical benefits is proposed. Turning into practice, a general framework of internet-based corporate environmental reporting is presented. This framework includes a basic architecture for an ICT-implementation to provide efficient, integrated, interactive, hypermedia featured, dialogue-oriented, and customized corporate environmental reporting.

Methods . Helpful guidance using the Internet for corporate environmental reporting has to meet three main prerequisites: (1) It should be based on reasonable and substantial structuring. (2) It should represent the state of the art. (3) Application should be feasible and practical use should be evident. Meeting these prerequisites, guidance is based on: (ad 1) the use of two heuristic techniques to explore an expedient system of technical benefits and to obtain order in the obvious disorder of realizations using the Internet; (ad 2) reviewing relevant literature, surveying empirical analysis, and analyzing available CERs on the Internet to describe the current state of the art; (ad 3) an illustration of customized CERs for: (i) employees, (ii) suppliers and business partners and (iii) investors to demonstrate hands-on use of Internet-technologies and Internet-services for corporate environmental reporting.

Results and Conclusions . For many companies, managing environmental reporting well is no longer seen as extra cost or burden on hard-pressed management. In pursuing helpful guidance, this paper provides a systematic overview of technical benefits using Internet-technologies and Internet-services for corporate environmental reporting and a general framework, which includes a basic architecture for an ICT-implementation. Environmental reporting companies can use these tools, on the one hand, to derive conceptual clarity, and on the other hand, to exploit all helpful opportunities of Internet use. Internet use enables companies to combine requirements of environmental reporting with ICT-specific challenges of the rising Internet Economy: firstly, to meet recent environmental reporting requirements, and secondly, to achieve competitive advantages.

Recommendations and Outlook . Regardless of progress in Internet-based environmental reporting during the recent years, companies are still in a premature stage. The majority of CERs on the Internet are static documents, slight adaptations of existing paper-based CERs or, a mere one-to-one copy from print media. Consequently, reporting companies should pay more attention to logistical aspects of their websites, including search facilities, navigation, hypermedia -features, feedback and contact information. Summed up, Internet-technologies and Internet-services are not limited to offer new channels of distribution or presentation of CERs. They are going to spur a shift towards efficient, integrated, interactive, hypermedia featured, dialogue-oriented, and customized environmental reporting.